

ROTATING BACK TO THE WORLD: AN ANALYSIS OF TWO VIETNAM WAR
MEMOIRS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of two Vietnam War memoirs through an autobiographical lens. Tim O'Brien's If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Send Me Home and Tobias Wolff's In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War are both narratives written by veteran/authors that lend themselves to the changing and new voice of all veteran authors.

By re-visioning and exploring these texts as autobiographies the genre of war literature becomes available to all veterans and soldiers. This exploration does not try to qualify whether or not the stories of these two men are historically accurate, but instead examines the historical, narrated, and narrating "I." In this way the text is available in terms of agency, authenticity, evidence, experience, and memory, among others. By using autobiographical theory as a means of analysis, the reading of the text moves away from traditional forms of "interpretation" to explore the texts in terms of the nonlinear, postmodern, and pioneering manner in which they were written.

In foregrounding history, establishing facts and statistics, and limiting the discussion of political and moral right and wrong, the texts are significant for being the life narratives of Vietnam veterans. This thesis and these books are not generalizations of the war, but an emphasis of one man's story in the hopes that it will inspire other men and women of the Vietnam era to write their own. It is also necessary to read these stories in terms of autobiography so that when the new veteran emerges from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq they will have a model in which to follow and a voice that is not only similar to their own, but has forged the way.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to three of the strongest, most persevering women I have ever had the honor of knowing—my grandma Helen Morgan, my mom Cheri W. Jones, and my nana Nancy Reid. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my daddy Rex A. Jones who taught my sister and I “edited” march songs from a young age, and who sparked my interest in “true” war stories by telling me his own. For those men and women who serve our country everyday in the US Armed Forces, and for those soldiers who fought and those who died in Vietnam.

WHEN HISTORY REALLY IS *HIS*-STORY

For many years the subject of the Vietnam War was taboo and often left unexplored by a society who agreed to disagree. Lately there has been a resurgence of attention to the Vietnam War, its precursory events and realities as revealed in films and literature. Perhaps such a resurgence of interest is due in part to the fact that Americans most recently find themselves in a similar situation—the conflict in Iraq. Society must again question why and how its sons and daughters are fighting a war that no one truly understands regardless of the current White House administration’s endless, supposedly reassuring use of words such as “liberty” and “freedom.” The parallels between Vietnam and Iraq are obvious. It seems as though the fears author and veteran Tim O’Brien voiced at the 1978 Vietnam Writers Conference at Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minnesota, “that America would forget the Vietnam War too quickly or remember it too simplistically” are unfortunately coming true (qtd. in Ringnalda, “Unlearning” 65). The cause of this reluctance to remember is as convoluted as the war itself. When polite society is forced to consider the Vietnam War era, it most popularly remembers the social revolutions of the 1960s, the war protestors, and the wrath directed at political figures. It was an era consumed by questionable truths and indeterminable lies. Recently there has also been a resurgence of autobiographical theory. Although autobiographical theory itself began in the 1960s, more importance has been given of late to women’s studies in relation to autobiography. Given the issues of truth and verifiability that become questionable in terms of both the Vietnam War and autobiographical theory, I think that same importance and re-vision should be given to the Vietnam War memoir.

There are numerous collections of poetry and approximately 200 works of fiction concerning the Vietnam War. However, there are literally thousands of personal narratives available written by those who were in some way active participants in the conflict that have not received the kind of critical attention that fictional works have, and this needs to be changed. As James Hannah writes, “The autobiographical reflections continue to stream out” and more importantly “Obviously there is still much to say, many who need to speak. And we must hear them for their own good as well as ours: Modern history repeats itself in devastatingly rapid cycles” (313).

This thesis will explore the memoirs of two veteran/authors, Tim O’Brien’s If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home and Tobias Wolff’s In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War. The narratives of the veteran/author, whether fact or fiction, are often generalized in the literary discourse theorists have long practiced—the search for solid analysis, truth, and examining structure and other elements of fiction. However, the memoirs of the veteran/author must be re-visioned as autobiography so that even though these same elements can still be explored, it can be conducted in a manner conscious of the man who wrote. In this way, traditional views of the war, the war story, and the war “hero” can be revised as well. By looking at the author/veteran’s so-called true account the reader must understand that “war, then, inevitably imposes a compromised version on the interpretation of genuine experience, an effect demonstrated by [the] literary conventions” (Wesley 2). Without trying to moralize, justify, or “make sense of the war [...] what emerges from the gap between [the referential sphere of culture and the experiential sphere of suffering and death] is indeed ‘truth,’ not the reflection of reality, but an invitation to engage in the effort of revision” (Wesley 15).

Still, perhaps in dissent of literary theory, the same kind of analysis that is appropriate for fictitious works are not necessarily appropriate for memoir. Although it has been argued that often fiction presents a greater or more meaningful truth than fact, autobiography (even if it blurs the line between fact and fiction) must be examined as such because even if it does not offer greater or more important truths, it does offer experience and difference.

At the forefront of the autobiographical discussion are Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Smith and Watson's method for "analyzing" or interpreting autobiography is detailed in their book Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives. Although Smith and Watson list fifty-two different kinds of self-narratives, ranging from women's studies to Hispanic cultures, there is no mention of the soldier's narrative in any specific capacity, much less in terms of Vietnam. However, they do provide an in-depth explanation and guide for how to read an autobiography. Theirs is the method I have adopted in re-visioning the memoirs of O'Brien and Wolff, privileging the "autobiographical 'I,'" identity, experience, embodiment and relationality in each text to show how the author/veteran moves beyond the universal "I" and historical accuracy to share his individual voice.

The way it was, and the way it unfortunately remains, is cast in terms of binary oppositions (good/evil, majority/minority, white/black, truth/lies, war protestor/soldier) and also in terms of what Lorrie Smith considers in her essay "Disarming the War Story," as "unexamined assumptions, fantasies, and myths rooted deep in the American psyche":

[T]he war was solely an American tragedy; our mission was worthy but our means were misguided; the war was "good" before Tet; meaning

resides in the individual soldier's angst rather than collective complicity;
we learned our lesson in Vietnam; trial by fire in battle makes boys men.

(Smith 89)

These thematic views of war ring true for American ideology. But it's not just misguided or problematic "psyches" alone that prohibit anything more than superficial consideration of the war. There are feelings of guilt, and a lack of knowledge and/or experience that keep those citizens who are disconnected, disconnected. Perhaps by reading the life narratives of those who served in the Vietnam War, these "simple" oppositions can also be re-visioned.

There are authors, veterans of the war, who explore the Vietnam memoir in terms of autobiographical theory. J. T. Hansen writes in his essay "Vocabularies of Experience" that he "accepts the literary conventions of Vietnam narratives [...] [but] [...] [s]ince the writers are oblivious to conventional literary distinctions, [...] [he does] not distinguish between autobiography and fiction [but] approaches them all as narratives" (Hansen 35). Hansen goes on to argue that to apply theory to these texts is to shift emphasis from the significance of the war story to theory. Of course he is in part right, but I would suggest that he neglects the veteran/author who is familiar with the theory and who has perhaps had a resulting advantage in the effort to "write a new script."

In that effort, however, readers must recognize that war literature prior to the Vietnam War had common themes and ideals that soldiers and civilians alike could identify with. As Lucas Carpenter suggests about prior American war novels:

The essence of the human experience of war is always and everywhere the same, generally entailing a profound progression from innocence to experience involving some combination of fear, courage, brotherhood, sacrifice, and, at its most existential, an ultimate realization that one is a meaningless pawn in the larger (though equally meaningless) game of history. (31)

The men and women who chose to write of the Vietnam War, through fiction, memoir, or a combination of both, dramatically stray from the “common experience,” eager to discover and develop “works that demonstrate the multi-perspectival, relativistic nature of America’s Vietnam experience and the futility of any attempt to identify, much less communicate (especially via language), any fundamental meaning or truth attaching to or derived from the war” (Carpenter 32). While Carpenter’s analysis, among others, provides a starting point for the realization that Vietnam War literature is evolving from the traditional themes of war literature into a postmodern, deconstructed experience, he fails to explain how to examine these texts. There has to be, at some point, a revisioning of the texts, and for those so-called true war stories, autobiographical theory is an available lens. The common thread in these memoirs is the question of truth, the reason why these are considered primarily postmodern texts, but also why they are autobiographies.

It is not easy to dismiss ideologies and traditionally held war “truths” for the veteran/author or the reader. As Ringnalda suggests, “many of the veterans [he’s] gotten to know” are concerned with “accuracy” (Ringnalda, “Unlearning” 65). He goes on to discuss that “mired in their own facts” veterans want to see “*their* Vietnam,” not to be

vindicated or shown as heroes” but so “this black hole in American consciousness [will be] illuminated” (65). Matters are complicated, however, by the fact that:

When these same people [veterans] write novels and make movies about Vietnam, their beam of light often is so privately narrow that very little illumination takes place. This is because, obsessed by the *facts* of their experiences, they are also victimized by them. (emphasis mine, Ringnalda, “Unlearning” 65)

However, despite the myopia of such a vision, there are certain strengths in challenging grand truths through memoir/autobiography. In analyzing texts in terms of autobiography, the reader must be willing to put aside concerns of historical fact, in addition to the “grand truths” of war, to determine personal truths. The importance of autobiography lies in who is writing, and what message that person is trying to convey. In reading memoirs, however, through an autobiographical framework, the historical context and other ways of “reading” the Vietnam War must be addressed so that they don’t hinder an autobiographical analysis.

THE UNDERSTOOD CONFUSION OF VIETNAM WAR LITERATURE

To label the literature, and even the Vietnam War itself as postmodern is not a new idea. Often critics who explore the fictions of Vietnam War literature address it as such. However, Donald Ringnalda asserts in his book Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War that writing, and therefore exploring narratives written, must mimic the fighting of the war as well. In this way, the uncertainty, feelings of loss, the indefinable enemy, the decentered nature, the lack of linearity, the circular battles, and technology that affected every part of the war can now become apparent in the literature about the war. Ringnalda suggests that these ideals, although recognizable as postmodern, are still problematic for most Americans, veteran and nonveteran alike, because we are still trying to “make sense” of the war. He suggests instead that to be “responsible tellers of the Vietnam story” writers should not try to “make sense of the war [...] [but] make sense of the sense-making process” (Ringnalda, Fighting 35). Ringnalda also suggests that trying to understand the Vietnam War to “make sense” of it reinforces the fact that the “most pernicious myth in America [is] that it has no myth” (Fighting 45). If we only seek to make sense of the war, as Americans we imply that “understanding” the conflict in Vietnam in some ways removes the problems it implies about our country and our country’s values.

This pervasive disillusionment is problematic because it allows the continuation of the belief that as Americans we shouldn’t turn our reflection inward, something that autobiographical theory privileges. In direct relation to rejecting the myth that America “has no myth,” we must also reject the great American war myth and the mythical war hero. As Paul Fussell delineates in his book The Great War and Modern Memory,

readers must consider the three mythic stages of the soldier—who may or may not go on to become the mythic hero—of first, preparation, second, participation in battle which includes “disenchantment and a loss of innocence,” and third, the “consideration” of experience because it lends order to that which must remain disordered (qtd. in Wesley 9).

Vietnam War literature, whether fiction or nonfiction, is often read through a postmodern framework because of the inclusion of high and low cultures and the paradoxes the era and the conflict brought to the forefront. However, in terms of revision, really neither theory is better than the other. It is not that the postmodern aspects of Vietnam War literature should be ignored, but rather those relevant texts should also be read through an autobiographical lens as well.

FACT IS STRANGER THAN FICTION: THE READER CONSTRUCTED PROBLEM WITH AUTHORITY AND EVIDENCE

An important aspect autobiographical theory is the “autobiographical pact.” The idea of the pact is that the author of a work offers his story as truth, and the reader agrees to read it as such. But how important is truth in relating a life history if such a narrative is not intended as a historically accurate portrayal? This is similar to the question of the generic classification of Vietnam War memoirs: autobiography, novel, autobiographical novel, etc. Philip Lejeune addresses both the question of truth as well as the question of genre in his book On Autobiography. As Paul John Eakin remarks in regard to Lejeune’s examination, “The autobiographical pact is a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life” (Eakin *ix*). However, Lejeune seems discontent with such a stark analysis as he questions himself in that “[his] definition [of the autobiography] left a number of theoretical problems unaddressed” and that “[...] these problems are irritating because of the endless repetition of arguments” (Lejeune 3). Around the 1960s, when autobiographical theory was emerging, critics such as Roy Pascal were concerned with a pure form of autobiography. Issues such as validity, age of the author, subject matter, and definition were strictly seen in terms of “black or white.” As the theory has evolved, critics are less concerned with so-called pure autobiography and recognize that debating authorship, mixing genres, and questioning “truth” is not only becoming obsolete, but taking away from the significance of the texts.

Perhaps the most debated issue in autobiographical theory is the question of truth. The question remains whether a text can be considered an autobiography if it is not historically accurate or factually true. Yet memory is an elusive ideal. Sometimes the memory of and reflection on experience is truer than the experience itself. Timothy Dow Adams asserts in his book Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography:

The history of American autobiography is filled with generic confusions bordering on fabrication [...] American autobiographical writing [...] is constantly ambiguous in terms of genre, with both historical authenticity and deliberate confusion between fiction and nonfiction, between literal and fictional prefaces, as constants. (5-6)

Adams goes on to question how “any autobiographer, particularly a fiction writer, [could] resist telling episodes that present a life story more truthfully than what actually happened ” (9). In light of Smith’s and Watson’s autobiographical lens, it seems as though the question of authority is a reader-constructed concept. As readers we have certain expectations and an implied set of questions related to life narratives. Authority does not only question the truth or validity of the narrative, but also the author’s right to speak it as “[...] experiential memory, even as it projects itself forward into new forms of imaginative invention that seem to challenge traditional modes of mythic understanding, proves often in retrospect to have shaped itself greatly in their prophetic image as well” (Beidler, American 26).

O’Brien’s memoir If I Die In a Combat Zone was part of the first wave of self-narratives to have been published following the Vietnam conflict. In terms of historical value, O’Brien’s narrative was and is important to the existing scholarship not only

because it opened a door for other veterans, but it also allowed the American public to experience almost first hand what the war was like, government approval aside. As a political statement, this narrative also allowed O'Brien to make clear his participation in the war not as a patriot or a traitor, but simply as a relater of events. His publication is vastly important historically, in that he shows the struggle, the facelessness, the brutality, and the humanity of the Vietnam experience, and unconsciously invites other participants of the war to do the same. At the beginning of If I Die in a Combat Zone, following the title page and before the table of contents, there is an insert that reads, "Names and physical characteristics of persons depicted in this book have been changed," thus asserting the truth of his story while circumventing the natural barriers to which some audiences may object, though "O'Brien does not deliver Vietnam in neatly packaged truisms" (Robinson).

O'Brien does not appeal to the clichéd American apple-pie society, but rather to the Vietnam veteran and that part of the American public who seeks some kind of understanding of the war as it was, though as Bonn suggests, he "is very conscious of his position as an intermediary between those with personal knowledge of the war and those without." He gives understanding about the war only in so much as he understands it himself. Based on his own understood confusion, he does not provide an ordered account of his experience.

Because of the time in which O'Brien wrote, shortly after the conclusion of the war, the reader is not so much concerned with accuracy, nor is the author concerned to make explicit his evidence of truth. However, for those readers who did not read If I Die in a Combat Zone at the time it was first published or read it after having read The Things

They Carried or Going After Cacciato the question of truth rears its ugly head. O'Brien appears to recognize the benefit of further blurring the line between fact and fiction in his later works as "[...] this sense of ever-evolving relationship between literary creation and the process of cultural myth-making at large, [it] has told about an experience more 'real,' [finally,] than any one that ever existed in fact" (Beidler, American 26).

In reading O'Brien's later works, and then reading his memoir, it is difficult to distance the two modes of writing from one another. It is apparent in his later works that he is much concerned and interested in playing with the concept of truth and adopts a postmodern method of story telling, and so they lend themselves much more readily to the kinds of literary criticism that a nonfictional work tends to exclude. Although the memoir is not as explicit in problematizing traditional narratives, identifiable genres, truth, and structure, they are still apparent. In breaking down grand narratives, O'Brien is able to offer more truth than if he resolutely focused on actual events. As Lejeune emphasizes, a novel perhaps lends itself better to truth because of its fictions. Indeed, O'Brien realizes the ability to play with genre and fact, often merging what seems to be real with the imaginary in an attempt to make the (un)moral and (un)reality of war and life more effective. With this in mind, it can be, at least initially, possible not to question the use or absence of evidentiary support in If I Die in a Combat Zone. Moreover, reading this work in its historical context, and in regard to the "autobiographical pact," lessens the question of truth.

The question of truth and validity of experience in the context of O'Brien's memoir seems almost absurd, especially in consideration of his later work, but is unconsciously mitigated throughout the novel. O'Brien often positions his reader after

the uncertainty of the first chapter by giving specific dates, naming towns and provinces, and providing lyrical descriptions, regardless of the beauty (or its lack) of each location. O'Brien relates to the reader that "the summer of 1968" was "the summer [he] turned into a soldier" (17). He also gives historical information such as naming political figures—"Richard Nixon looked like a loser"—to add to the reality of the time (17). By remembering that "August 13" was the day he left for war, he dares the reader to question *his* reality (21). Still it seems that evidence of truth in the book cannot be separated from the question of the authority and authenticity of O'Brien the author. Unlike some autobiographers, agency does not appear to be one of O'Brien's concerns. In terms of the authority to write he seems quite sure of himself, perhaps as a "privileged" white male. But he does seem concerned with his agency to write as a soldier, and a dissenting one at that. Tone is the best indication of his insecurity, at times sounding like a sulking adolescent who uses aggression and control as a point of departure. However, this question of authority is often overshadowed, and rightfully so, in his memoir by his need to explain, confess, and even apologize in a similar fashion to what "Catherine Calloway [...] writes of Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried [in that he] 'demonstrates well the impossibility of knowing the reality of the war in absolute terms [...]' showing the fluidity of emotion and purpose that moves beyond concrete truths (qtd. in Liparulo 75).

As Marilyn Wesley writes in her essay, "The alien experience of war in Vietnam is directly transferable. In fact the elision of author and reader [...] [through] the perspective of an absent 'you' [...] is engineered through the presentation of universal and simple correlatives of shared experience" (3). This is the source of the magnetism of these memoirs. Wolff's memoir In Pharaoh's Army differs greatly from O'Brien's.

Truth and authority are not nearly as questionable in Wolff's memoir, perhaps because he has written previous memoirs. His memoir also differs from O'Brien's in that whereas O'Brien's memoir was almost an instantaneous reaction to the war itself, Wolff's memoir is a reflection on not only the war but his entire life, inside and out of Vietnam, as a young man who was greatly influenced by the war. It is undoubtedly a soldier's story, but it isn't limited to the subject of war.

Before In Pharaoh's Army begins, Wolff quotes Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier:

You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads.

A life lived before him, and yet Wolff writes decades later, the story of his youth, and with this quote justifies the act. He may well be writing for therapeutic means, but if that is the case, the therapy applies to many personal issues—the war, his relationship with his father, fighting the ghosts of friends, people, and girlfriends lost. Wolff's memoir is not limited in scope and all aspects of his life at this time are discussed at least in some manner.

The reader is aware that the stories have been manipulated, yet she must uphold her part of the agreement in the autobiographical pact and trust that the events written are true. Wolff acknowledges that names have been changed in his narrative, but he places it in an inconspicuous location on his copyright page. He is not trying to prove his

authenticity or explain his agency in writing. He is writing as a veteran, an author, a teacher, and a member of society. He does not have to prove anything to make it truer. His intention and method aside, he writes for “the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote” and perhaps that is justification enough.

Neither O’Brien nor Wolff are very concerned with their own right to tell their narratives. Both men recognize that names and descriptions have been changed, but it is the reader who is responsible for the questions. As Lejeune illustrates through his discussion of the autobiographical pact, in labeling a work as an autobiography the author is asserting the truth of the story. The reader, however, must be willing and, therefore, agree to accept the narrative as such. Ultimately, it is not up to the reader to determine the fact or fiction of the work, only to read it as it was written, as autobiography.

TEMPORALITY, COHERENCE, AND DEBUNKING THE MYTHICAL AMERICAN WAR HERO

In keeping the disorder disordered and in an effort, as Ringnalda suggests, to reject the myths Americans hold, even unintentionally, about the Vietnam War readers should also accept the authors' intention of not "sanitizing the war via the reassuring and alluring power of linear, mimetic narratives [...] [instead allowing them to] sift through the wreckage and offer up deconstructive, interrogative collages composed of unsettling juxtapositions" (*Fighting xi*).

In terms of structure and temporality O'Brien does not adhere to the traditional, linear means of story telling in *If I Die In a Combat Zone*. But in fact, to do so would limit his narrative. O'Brien is not mysterious. He explicitly makes his points and in doing so makes his story accessible to any number of people, veteran and nonveteran alike. O'Brien refuses to locate his reader, pushing her from the beginning toward confusion and displacement. Such "geographic dislocation is symptomatic of the American soldiers' lack of any sort of historic, or moral bearing while fighting the Vietnam War" (Bonn). He manipulates and alienates the reader. He has no chronological perspective, as he jumps around from past to present, peace to hostility. O'Brien seeks to keep the reader as confused and vulnerable as he himself seems to be. He flashes forward and flashes back, there are gaps and omissions, and these techniques serve to reinforce the confusion and as such replicate memory personified, which is not linear and is uncontrolled. As Daniel Robinson suggests, "[O'Brien's] stories revolve around multiple centers of interest—at once stories in the truest sense, with a core of

action and character, and also metafictional stories on the precise nature of writing war stories.”

O’Brien’s If I Die in a Combat Zone is a pastiche of narrative plotting and modes. Although he employs a number of starts in his narrative, no one narrative plot seems to be the right one. The Bildungsroman quality of O’Brien’s Midwestern reflection is dropped and he and his reader are left with “confessional self-examination” and meditation (Smith and Watson 169). O’Brien contemplates his place, hoping that “this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace” or to “confirm the old beliefs about war” (23) And according to McCay “that is what O’Brien has done ever since. He has told war stories, stories that contain the struggle to understand, to recall what happened, and to give some sense to the horror that was Vietnam” (McCay 116). In meditation, even at the beginning of his narrative, O’Brien confesses that “now, war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth” and he wonders “is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme?” (23). Perhaps it was never his intention “to teach anything of the war” but in his musings he unconsciously presents not a moral or even a theme, but the idea that in telling his “war story” he is teaching, but it is “ultimately unclear whether he embraces or rejects the power of the story and the storyteller” (Bonn). The gaps and omissions, however, also serve as a quiet counterpart to the multiple voices O’Brien contains. It is through the uneven chronological relation that the reader is most able to see the conflict and struggle of the historical, narrated, and narrator “Is” of Tim O’Brien. “In presenting stories from a war that lacked a traditional progression or a logical structure, O’Brien demands more from his writing that strict realism can provide” and this can be seen in Wolff’s memoir as well (Robinson).

Similar to O'Brien, who Ringnalda describes as a guerrilla writer, Wolff's In Pharaoh's Army also takes the reader "on nightmarish, postmodern journeys into regions where everything is so dark and indistinct that [readers] often don't know where [they] are" (Fighting 36). The chronology of Wolff's memoir, especially in terms of narrative plotting and the time span of the narrative, is perhaps the most important element in the entire work. Chronology and related narrative aspects control every other aspect of the novel including setting and character. The structure and temporality of Wolff's memoir is more traditional than many Vietnam War narratives. Although he hesitates to locate the reader in terms of dates, this allows the reader to become unconcerned with history and historical fact. It also provides a sense of loss. Because Vietnam is often remembered by specific years (i.e. 1965 saw an influx of American soldiers, 1966 and 1967 saw some of the heaviest fighting, before and after the Tet Offensive, 1971 saw soldiers coming home, etc) Wolff removes references of time, at least initially, so that the reader cannot judge the experience based on any previous knowledge of the war.

The major theme of Wolff's memoir is personal growth. The memoir is structured in parts numbered one through three. These parts do not follow a chronological timeline and do not adhere to traditional forms of place, time, and/or character. It is a Bildungsroman of sorts, in that it reconstructs his life, but it doesn't wholly fit the term because Wolff is not trying to find his place in society. It is of course meditative and reflective as memoirs tend to be, but each memory that Wolff makes use of has its own purpose and, in turn, its own kind of narrative mode. Again, reflecting Wolff's roots in the short story, the three parts, or "chapters," are episodic, and collectively they show the growth of his life from youth to man. These three parts further

immortalize three of the major life changes, youth, experience (in war and out), and maturity, and each part represents one of those changes in some ways. However, in his use of the narrative sections as such, Wolff is not trying to moralize or make sense of the war beyond his own scope.

The lack of linearity can also be seen through the settings each veteran/author provides in his text and “readers [...] can either quit reading or become guerrillas themselves in the profusion of the landscape” (Ringnalda, Fighting 37). O’Brien begins his story in the wild unknown of Vietnam and a conversation between three soldiers who question their place:

“Somebody’s gonna ask me someday where the hell I was over here,
where the bad action was, and, shit, what will I say?”

“Tell them St. Vith.”

“What?”

“St. Vith,” I said. “That’s the name of this ville. It’s right here on the map.
Want to look?”

He grinned. “What’s the difference? You say St. Vith, I guess that’s it. I’ll
never remember. How long’s it gonna take me to forget *your* fuckin’
name?” (O’Brien 5).

From this instance of dislocation O’Brien flashes back to his life before the war, letting his reader see him as a young boy in the Midwest. He needs the reader to see his family’s “American-as-apple-pie life” to bolster support and to protect himself later as he rationalizes his own rejection of the mythical American war hero. O’Brien writes of his father, a World War II veteran, and the other men of the town who served as role models

for him and his friends. He tells of these men so that it will be clear that he knew of “heroes” and “justifiable” war as they explain that it was “[n]othing to do with cause or reason; the war was right [...] and it had to be fought,” in contrast to the ambiguous rationale for the war O’Brien himself encountered (13). He culturally situates himself in the stereotypical American life to show that anyone can object to a war, and in turn pictures his town as a simulacrum with the “lake, Lake Okabena, reflect[ing] the town-itself, bouncing off a black-and-white pattern identical to the desolate prairie: flat, tepid, small, strangled by algae, shut in by middle-class houses, lassoed by a ring of doctors, lawyers, CPA’s, dentists, drugstore owners, and proprietors of department stores” (15). He strips away the security and moral aptitude of the town to prove that things change. Portraying the town as such, he decenters its authority and “questions the presumed sanctity of the oldest male law” (C. S. Horner). But the authority of the town and preexisting cultural codes are not that easily removed, and when O’Brien is drafted he struggles with the prospect of disturbing the order of things by dodging the draft, thinking he “owed the prairie something” (O’Brien 18). In thinking that he “owes” the “prairie” (i.e. the role models of his youth and, in essence, his country), the town’s authority and society’s sense of respectability overtakes O’Brien’s sense of self, and what he believes is “morally” right in terms of the war. O’Brien struggles with these barriers even though “his own reasons for going were vague and unformed [...] it was fear of censure and isolation [...] it was not courage [...] but embarrassment, and [therefore] that knowledge undercuts his sense of his own worth” (McCay 116).

Through the relation of his youth, O’Brien is able to move beyond “the luxury of irony directed outward—satire—[that] is based on the false assumption that there is an

inviolable set of American standards—a norm—from which we can measure the temporary deviation of the Vietnam War” (Ringnalda, Fighting 22). The same is true for Wolff’s memoir. Wolff’s Vietnam memoir has received little critical attention. Perhaps one of the reasons is that Wolff doesn’t fit nicely into any one mold. His memoir does not have the same postmodern “feel” that most Vietnam narratives seem to employ and his personal narrative “owes its power to the crafts of fiction: selection of detail, evocation of tone, arrangement, emphasis, characterization and the like” (Hannah 314). Like O’Brien, Wolff engages the reader by starting his narrative in Vietnam, but he does not relate a war scene. Instead he shows himself interacting with the people. He provides a visual image of the war as he knew it. He describes My Tho, the unAmericanized village where he is stationed, with its “crumbling stucco mansions along the boulevard that fronted the river, their walls still bearing traces of the turquoise, salmon, and lavender washes ordered from France by their previous owners” (Wolff 11) and contrasts it with the grunts’ base at Dong Tam with its “mud and muddy tents and muddy men,” the “intractable bog” a “shithole” that physically manifested the soldiers’ “capacity for collective despair” (23). Dong Tam represents all of the goods, commodities, and stereotypical democratic and capitalistic endeavors that the American government tried to use to win over the country and the people of Vietnam.

However, for Wolff, the benevolent lone white man, My Tho represents the generosity of the American ideal. My Tho is a place a part from the firefights elsewhere in Vietnam. This is not to say that it was less dangerous or violent, but those things came about in different ways. The setting of My Tho allows Wolff to be “big among the small, rich among the poor [...] benevolent, generous, protective [...] like a father, even as lord”

(13). Wolff situates his reader here, in the relative safety but ultimately conflicted village of My Tho so that he can privilege the change not that he's about to encounter, but the change he has already gone through. Wolff similarly situates the reader in Californian cities and Washington D. C. at later points in the narrative to further allow the setting to mimic and physically manifest the situation and emotion of his life at that point.

By turning the irony inward, both O'Brien and Wolff look "to [their] own book, [their] own language, and [their] own participation in the American myths of righteousness and innocence" so as to reject the 'City on a Hill' myth that surrounds the war (Ringnalda, Fighting 22). O'Brien and Wolff cannot not be effective storytellers, meaning cannot be developed, and the reality of their stories cannot be related if they were to present the war as if it were something cheerful and uplifting. As Wesley writes, "According to Leo Bersani, mimetic fiction also constructs 'a secret complicity between the novelist and his society's illusions about its own order...by providing [society] with strategies for containing and repressing its disorder within significantly structured stories about itself'" (4).

HINDSIGHT IS 20/20: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL “I”

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of autobiographical theory is the autobiographical “I.” The autobiographical “I” can be described as a narrator or speaker who refers to himself. As Smith and Watson assert, although the speaker has one name, the “I” seems to be comprised of multiple “Is” beyond the I now and the I then. Smith and Watson further break down the autobiographical I into the “real” or historical “I,” the narrating “I,” and the narrated “I.” This is because such a simple distinction does not account for the complexities of the self narrative or the multiple identities of the author reinforcing the idea of postmodern theory which suggests multiple stories (Smith and Watson 58).

The narrating “I” is the person who tells the narrative and is “neither unified nor stable” (60). The narrating “I” is multiple like the voices he portrays and in relation to that “speaks in [...] heteroglossia” (60). O’Brien’s narrating “I,” for example, is aggressive. Perhaps it is because the reader is able to see all of O’Brien’s models of identity in reference to his narrating “I.” He is a veteran, an author, a storyteller, and a member of society. O’Brien must make room in his narrating “I” for all of these selves, and at times they conflict. That conflict, in turn, is manifested in his tone and perspective. The narrating “I” is at once angry, forceful, rebellious, and unapologetic. His tone is aggressive, though in some ways balanced in relating the “good” and “evil” in people, relating the “evil” and “not quite so evil” nature of the war, sharing the struggles of morality, right and wrong, keeping his reader with him, but not letting the reader make any decisions for herself, training the reader like Sergeant Blyton trained O’Brien—making the reader hate him and knowing the hate is necessary—while never allowing

equality to be a part of the conversation. Although all these things seem inherently negative they are necessary.

The narrating “I” has perspective, however. He has gone through battle and come out the other side physically unharmed. He is special. He is blessed. He is lucky. His emotions, his mental acceptance, are not so charmed. The narrating “I” has hindsight, a more significant quality than luck and he uses that to educate the reader. He does not generalize, nor sympathize; he is not apathetic, but removed. O’Brien must be distanced from his subject to a certain extent. Becoming too involved would undermine the reader’s ability to respond to his words. The narrating “I” takes the reader through his childhood. He explains his past and his home, his town and his family. O’Brien needs the reader to see where he came from to make where he went important and significantly different. The narrating “I” often changes tense as the situation warrants, positioning the reader as an observer, but also at times forcing her to participate in the reality of war. O’Brien could have been more brutal with his descriptions of the violence of war; instead he catches the reader off guard with silent attacks. He focuses on the acts of hate that war invites. The enemy is everywhere and anyone, sometimes even an American soldier. O’Brien’s narrating “I” does not judge this man, and he does not react, but he forces the reader to participate in *all* the realities of war. He relates the experience of war not as an older man, not in the way of the veterans of World War II, not in a reflective manner on the good ‘ol days, yet still significantly changed with a significant story of reality and unreality to share. The narrating “I” is not naïve, but neither is he hardened by his experience. He learned and is learning and he writes, “I would crusade against this war, and if, when I was released, I would find other wars, I would work to discover if they

were just and necessary, and if I found out they were not, I would have another crusade” (93).

The models of identity, or the multiple selves, are only a representative spectrum of the veteran/author who lives. But “the narrator and the speaking voices are not entirely synonymous” (Smith and Watson 60). As with O’Brien, Wolff’s “narrator is a composite of speaking voices, the ‘I’ a sign of multiple voices” (60). Overall, Wolff’s narrating “I” is pensive and in control. His tone is calm and confident, reflective, and connected. The narrating “I” makes great distinctions between the situations he shares, and each one builds on the other. He is careful to delineate relationships with the characters he presents and the narrated “I” so that each one is significant in its own right.

The narrating “I” is not ashamed of his life, but he isn’t forceful in trying to make the reader understand or aggressive in making his points. The tone of the narrating “I” changes depending on what time in his life or what character he is discussing. When the narrating “I” presents the narrated “I” of Wolff as young man, his tone reflects a kind of rueful, but loving distaste of the insecure, immature and unworldly young man. He describes himself as “cheerful to a fault [...] glib, breezy, heedless of the fact that for most of the men this cramped inglorious raft was the end of the line” and recognizes that “most of what I looked at I didn’t really see” (Wolff 40). His tone changes as he himself changed. Although the narrating “I” is still quite aware of the idealistic dreamings of an 18 year-old kid, the move from insecurity to superiority has begun, “no longer a powerless confusion of desires” but a force bolstered by the confidence he garners from the military (44).

The narrating “I” has freedoms that the narrated “I” cannot possess. The narrating “I” is fluid while the narrated “I” is “the object ‘I,’ the protagonist of the narrative, the version of self” the narrating “I” privileges (Smith and Watson 60). The narrated “I” is only allowed the freedom of the author because the “narrated ‘I’ is the subject of history whereas the narrating ‘I’ is the agent of discourse” (60). In this light the narrated “Is” of both O’Brien and Wolff are limited, and it is often difficult to distinguish the two “Is” from one another. O’Brien’s narrated “I” does possess the naïveté, inexperience, and idealism of the young man about whom Pascal warns. Indeed, his models of identity are different as well. The narrated “I” is soldier, objector, son, brother, and friend. O’Brien, however, does not shy away or hide this from his reader. The narrated “I” needs real heroes when the fictional ones no longer seem applicable “because it was good to learn that human beings sometimes embody valor, that they do not always dissolve at the end of a book or movie reel” (145). The narrated “I” of O’Brien is real. He is fallible and approachable. He is not heroic or brave, but neither is he sadistic or cowardly as he determines “if a man can squirm in a meadow, he can shoot children [but] neither is an example of courage” (136). The narrated “I” of O’Brien is every man, veteran or not. It is as if he wants the reader to see the immaturity, discomfort, and confusion of his narrated self. The narrated “I” of Wolff is better served through relationality.

The historical “I” represents the historical person who is situated in a “particular time and place” and is verifiable (Smith and Watson 59). However, Smith and Watson problematize reading the historical “I” because they believe he can never be known. It seems, however, that the historical “I” cannot be fully removed from the ideological “I” who is also perhaps unknowable. I would suggest that in some ways, the line between

the historical and ideological “Is” is blurred as the reader considers the multiple factors that serve as a catalyst for writing. The historical “I” of O’Brien seems wary of a possible backlash to his discussion, as it was published almost immediately after the war. He is watchful and waiting for some attack. Situated in a society trying to forget the war, O’Brien’s historical “I” seems uncomfortable but resigned to his task. He has taken an unobtrusive position, not a prominent figure yet, but an average man. What makes him significant is his veteran status, but that seems less than important in terms of society. He is an outsider, but an outsider who is trying to bring the insiders out, rather than trying to invade social space.

Wolff, conversely, is not quite so much on the defensive and has used his time in war to show the strength of human character, but at the same time he recognizes that he has multiple selves, multiple modes of identity, that soldier and civilian are one person. The soldier/veteran and boy/man do not grow off of one another; they are parallel, they exist at once and occur at the same time. Wolff emphasizes that they are each different and may affect his life, in different ways, but they cannot be separated. He cannot relate the story of one without relating the story of the other. In doing so, he asks his reader to acknowledge him as a human with human fallibility.

Wolff’s memoir possesses a multitude of voices and it is necessary for Wolff to share them all to enable the reader to see him as not only the soldier in Vietnam, but the boy he was, and the man he has become. The historical “I” of Wolff has many selves, or models of identity. He is a teacher, an author, a father, and a veteran. The historical “I” is a prominent, seemingly well-adjusted member of society. By 1994, the Vietnam War memorial had been constructed and efforts had been made to find POWs and those still

missing in action. Public opinion of the war in Vietnam, though surely still present, was more understanding of if not the whys at least the hows of the war. The previous silence of the Vietnam veteran had started to be broken. The historical “I” of Wolff had more favorable and agreeable conditions socially in which to write. A cry of public dissent was less of a threat, but he would still have his own demons to face. It is through his experience in life up until the point of writing that controls and lends control to his tone and narrative structure.

Smith and Watson suggest further breaking down the autobiographical “I” so that readers can fully view the life, the cultural and social issues that induce writing, but in consideration of limiting the narrated “I” as object, the blurring of the historical and ideological “Is,” and the difficulty in really recognizing difference, it seems in some ways that simply labeling the I then and the I now may be enough in some instances. Certain myths of the Vietnam War are so pervasive, it is difficult to distinguish them from truths. It could be inferred that both O’Brien and Wolff’s sense of “I-ness” still struggled as they were writing.

PUNCHING “HOLES IN HOLES”: RELATIONALITY AND MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSE-MAKING PROCESS

There are any number of reasons why someone would wish to write his autobiography, perhaps to explain or confess, but also perhaps to make sense, at least in some way, of the experience he is writing about. Neither O'Brien nor Wolff ever really come to an understanding of their times in Vietnam, but in some way they “make sense of the sense making process” through relating their experiences, though they don't try to “punch holes in holes” by attacking sometimes indiscernible aspects of their military experiences (Ringnalda 36). Perhaps the most important manner in which they do so is through relationality. As Smith and Watson note, relationality “invites us to think about the different kinds of textual others through which an ‘I’ narrates the formation or modification of self-consciousness” (65).

O'Brien uses “contingent others” who “populate the text as actors in the narrator's script of meaning” (65). O'Brien does not want any one too close to avoid investing himself personally to any person or any ideal, but also because making a friend would mean that he was the same, that he was truly a soldier and in making friends, as he ultimately does he “betray[s], in a sense, [his] wonderful suffering” (35). Like the narrated “I” of O'Brien the characters represent everyman. But O'Brien is sparse in his description of the people he encounters. Only a choice few extend beyond lines of dialogue or the description of incidents in which they were involved. The characters that O'Brien does seem to privilege, Erik, the friend he finally surrendered to in boot camp, and Captain Johansen, the human embodiment of a hero, are both characters that lead the narrated and narrating “Is” to some conclusion about O'Brien and serve as some of the

“numerous examples” of his “reliance upon literary and philosophical texts to provide a structure for his time in Vietnam” (Bonn).

Erik is a kindred spirit and often also serves as a kind of conscience or mediator of O’Brien’s thoughts. Captain Johansen serves a similar capacity as a model of behavior, who constantly motivates O’Brien’s temptation to succumb to bitterness and guilt. These men are not presented as the only “moral” men in Vietnam, but the other characters are more generalized and seem to represent the any man/everyman of the Vietnam experience. O’Brien writes of the so-called good and bad sides of the American soldier. To see the soldiers as entirely good or entirely evil isn’t the point and the same is true for the “enemy” soldiers as well. But his sketchy characterization of the men he met and knew is more than a stylistic technique since it makes his narrative more available to the reader and discourages a generalized judgment of the soldier and the war.

In boot camp the narrated “I” of O’Brien hates drill Sergeant Blyton, not for the man, but for what the man stands for as “he [Blyton] is evil. He does not personify the tough drill sergeant; rather he is the army; he’s the devil [...] Words will kill him” and indeed they do, not just in regard to the “evil” drill sergeant but everything that O’Brien allows him to stand for (41). His message is not hidden. The army is the devil and Blyton is its personification, but unlike Paul Fussell’s schema, delineated in Wesley’s essay, “the dehumanizing preparation for the war in the boot camp [...] is coextensive with, not different from, the war itself” (9). But his loss of the real is not only seen in his distaste for the war and its counterparts, but also in the things he holds personally.

In regard to his nameless girlfriend O’Brien comes to realize that he is not alone in his loss of the real. In recognizing that “if [he] uttered the word ‘face’ or tried to

squeeze out a picture of the girl herself, all there was to see was the word 'face' or the word 'eye,' printed out before me" (92). Those back home were also unable to merge the idea of war with the reality of war. Through this objectification, as he does with his fictional novels he "demolishes the masculine mystique of the violence of war as the litmus test for manhood" and allows again every person to become caught in the web of Vietnam (Wesley 11). This can be seen both in his treatment of character and action as "... [his characters] are not scripted to show grace under pressure or to elevate the human reaction to the horrors of war. O'Brien's characters do not die filled with the notions of courage, honor and camaraderie: they just die" (Robinson).

He writes of the soldier who would shoot his own foot off to keep from fighting, the guts of a friend lying beside his body; he recalls specific soldiers by the body parts they lost, and he contemplates death and how "you wonder how it feels, what it looks like inside you [...] you feel your blood and nerves working" (70) but the men knew "to talk about [death] was bad luck, the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy" (141). To see themselves in terms of body parts, was also an effort to keep sane. To name every man, to see beyond the face or the arm or the ear would be an avenue to a war that could never be moved beyond. In his objectification, in his use of the body, O'Brien finds protection from a consuming cynicism and bitterness and at once reinforces and removes the pressure "to react to deadly crisis according to the sacred rules of a male honor code" (C. S. Horner).

Wolff's relationality has in, some ways, more significance than O'Brien in that he uses "significant others" whose "stories are deeply implicated in his and through whom he understand his own self-formation" (Smith and Watson 65). Most of the commentary

concerning Wolff's memoir have to do with his attention to fictional elements such as character as he seems to exemplify the "writer who is dedicated to an art of autobiography that is shaped and streamlined like fiction, [and] can't do without making symbols of other people—and of moments and places and institutions and himself" (Wood 316). Wolff's different voices and models of identity are revealed when he talks about different characters. Each of them represents a part of him as he has come to realize and express himself. The narrating "I" and narrated "I" work in a similar fashion to reveal Wolff as he was and as he has come to be. The characters who Wolff emphasizes, his father, his comrade Sergeant Benet, other soldiers such as Captain Kale and even his ill-fated dog Canh Cho, are discussed because they speak to something that reflects Wolff himself and indeed it seems as though Wolff has a relationality to these people not only for himself, but also for them. Apparent gaps and omissions in Wolff's work are compensated through his examination of character.

It seems as though the person in the memoir that Wolff most greatly emphasizes is his father. In fact, the reader learns as much about Wolff's father as she does about his time in Vietnam. When Wolff's narrating "I" discusses his father he is initially perturbed and his tone reverberates with the petulance of a small child who feels himself abandoned. He designs to be different from his father at every turn, searching to "be a man of honor" in contrast to the convict thief he knew his father to be (Wolff 46). It isn't until Wolff is actually in Vietnam that the reader is given a different perspective of Arthur, his father. The narrating "I" philosophizes "[his father] must have wondered where he stood in all this, what [Wolff had] forgiven, what [Wolff] held against him, what [Wolff] held against himself" (113) and recognizes his inability to see his father's

demise with grace as “even when [he’d] loved [his father], even when [he’d] despised [his father], there had always been a certain fear. [But] no more” (114). But the pre-war narrated “I” projects an antagonistic dissatisfaction with what his father stood for as a result of which he “kept after him in this falsely innocent way,” reflecting the immaturity and aggressions that come from a haunted past (114). Yet the narrating “I” regains control and realizes “I didn’t know what I wanted” (114). The post-war narrated “I” is more sympathetically disposed toward his father and comes to a realization that “[he] didn’t have to believe [his father]; it was enough to [...] see him there” (198).

It is after the war that his father’s home in Manhattan Beach, California becomes in its own right a safe haven for Wolff. He is comfortable and calm there: “the smallest acts felt purposeful and worthwhile, and freed me from the sodden sensation of uselessness” (199-200). Manhattan Beach is the idealized life, however, where the realities of being back in “the world” did not seem quite as difficult or pressing, but as Anne Shewring suggests, “It is perhaps ultimately the challenge to the national consensus which distinguishes the Vietnam veteran’s homecoming experience from that of former veterans, but we should be wary of creating differences where none really exist.” It is his comparison of his father to the Toad in The Wind in the Willows that allows Wolff to see his father as a certain kind of man who will never change, and he becomes not just resigned but satisfied with such a realization. In Manhattan Beach with his father Wolff says, “We were entirely at home, alone in an island of lamplight. I didn’t want anything to change” (202) and after years of harboring a deep-rooted desire to be nothing like his father, the reader can see that they are similar, “talking about everything except Vietnam or prison,” aspects of both lives that each wanted to forget (202). When Wolff finally

moves on it is not without regret because “the truth was already known to both of [them] that [Wolff] would not be back and that [his father] would live alone and die alone, as he did, two years later” (211). If Wolff’s memoir is partly therapeutic, such therapy applies as much to his relationship with his father as the Vietnam War. His relationality to Arthur Wolff leads to a sense of closure. It is here that he seems to be at peace with his father as he notes that in some ways convict and veteran mean the same thing as they are both imprisoned by their past experiences.

Another character whom Wolff comes to terms with and uses as a catalyst for his own self-realization is Sergeant Benet. Sgt. Benet serves as the angel in Wolff’s narrative. It is through Benet that Wolff holds himself accountable for upstanding behavior and moral aptitude and Benet serves as a stark contrast to Arthur Wolff. Although they seem to be approximately the same age, Wolff endows Benet with the kind of qualities he wishes his own father had possessed. A career soldier, Benet had served in Korea and a previous tour in Vietnam and Wolff describes him as “a kind, dignified, and forbearing man” but adds that he was “solitary,” not just because he wanted to be but because “the Vietnamese had added [American] bigotries to their own.” Yet Wolff respected him, as did the other men “because he gave no sign at all of being anybody’s inferior” (29). Benet catalyzes Wolff’s important evolution from boy to man because in teaching him social equality, or at least social equality on some level, he also teaches him social responsibility: “I knew that [Benet] was my superior in every way that mattered, but he didn’t allow me to acknowledge this and gave no sign of suspecting it himself” (162). Wolff senses the wrong in allowing men who fought together mindless of race to allow the prejudice to manifest itself during social situations.

In the same way Wolff needed his father to embody an ideal, so does he need Benet. His concern for Benet reflects the concern for himself because in needing Benet to represent goodness and morality, and he does indeed appear to be the voice of reason as well as “good” and “moral,” Wolff discovers a support system in Vietnam. It allows him to mimic Benet’s actions and achieve a sense of order. Wolff does not privilege Benet with impossible standards, but utilizes his character to express how Wolff related and grew from the relationships he formed while in the Vietnam War, while at the same time addressing other issues of the Vietnam era and the mythical soldier.

During his tour of duty, Wolff has been living and working with America’s Vietnamese allies. He often feels himself the brunt of the joke and lacking the respect an officer of his stature might normally receive. He does not claim to understand them; he does not portray them in a negative light, but even though they are not the enemy they still become a sea of faces with customs that are strange. Wolff can only assimilate so much. He is still an outsider, the minority, the Other. Enter Canh Cho, the ill-fated dog whose name means “dog stew.” It is through Canh Cho and the Vietnamese soldier who holds him captive that Wolff encounters an ultimate loss of superiority:

[The Vietnamese sergeant] wasn’t playing with the dog, he was playing with me, with my whiteness, my Americaness, my delicate sentiments—everything that gave me my sense of superior elevation. And I knew it. But knowing did not free me from these conditions, it only made me feel how hopelessly subject I was to them. (82)

Canh Cho is the Vietnamese people. He is tired and scared, beaten down with no hope. Wolff has tried to save him, but he cannot win Canh Cho’s trust, and he never will.

Wolff's inability to make friends with Canh Cho and the dog's unwillingness to be owned leave them both wary and angry:

I spoke to him in low, gentle tones and when he continued to cringe I began to dislike him [...] I disliked him for involving me in his bad luck, and making a fool of me. I disliked him for not seeing any difference between me and the man who'd hurt him. (83)

When Wolff's tour of duty is over he wonders what will become of Canh Cho, the dog who represents the people of Vietnam. Though he warred to save him, death is the only answer. Wolff struggled to save Canh Cho because he was so representative of the Vietnamese people. Wolff understood that he couldn't save a country or its people, but he could at least try to save the dog. But Canh Cho's fate is inauspicious, and he also represents the destruction of a country. Symbolically, during Wolff's last night in Vietnam, during his going away party, he unknowingly, at least initially, eats Canh Cho, a rather disturbing, if fitting end to the dog named Dog Stew. Wolff reflects:

In moments of clarity I'd known he would come to this. He knew it himself in his doggy way, and the knowledge had given him a morose, dull, hopeless cast of mind [...] I'd been fretting about his prospects. Now my worries were over. So were his. At least there was some largesse in this conclusion, some reciprocity. I had fed him, now he fed me, and fed me. (189)

Wolff dolefully focuses on Canh Cho as a conclusion to his time in Vietnam, if not to his life. He ironically situates the dog as prophetically as the state of the country he is leaving. He cannot be remorseful; it is the way of things—the nature of war.

O'Brien and Wolff openly question truth, as do the people they encounter. The grand truths of war, as well as the grand truths of life, in essence the metanarratives of human existence, become too broad, too generalized to be applicable to one man's life. O'Brien and Wolff realize that while they each are a part of the greater collective, they are first and foremost individuals. Their characters are the catalysts for this change. The characters allow O'Brien and Wolff to recognize what they want to become, what they cannot comprehend, and what they never want to be. It is not all about honor and duty, but also survival, and survival without cowardliness is heroic in itself and "More than anything else [...] a sustained meditation not only on the experience of the war but also on the very idea of sense-making itself [...] literally inventing its own context of vision ..." (Beidler, American 100).

HISTORY IS DOOMED TO REPEAT ITSELF

To be able to move beyond historical “fact” so that a re-visioning of the life narratives can occur, the facts must be contemplated, even if briefly. Readers must recognize the impact of the cultural, social, economical, and political events that occurred during this time so that they may better read the memoirs of these veteran/authors. The Vietnam era, as it is now known, spanned from August 1964 to May 1975. The first American combat death in Vietnam occurred in 1945. Although America never officially proclaimed war, our military presence began to be recognized as early as 1950. Over the course of the Vietnam era, approximately nine million military personnel served on active duty. Approximately 8.7 million soldiers served during the actual conflict between 1964 and 1973 throughout the South East Asia Theatre (including Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and the South China Sea), while approximately 2.5 million soldiers served in the country of South Vietnam itself. In addition, 50,000 men served in Vietnam between 1960 and 1964, before a full military presence was known. Forty to sixty percent of this total was in some way exposed to “enemy” attack on a fairly regular basis. Over the course of the U. S. involvement in Vietnam, hostile attacks accounted for the deaths of 47,378 soldiers while another 10,800 soldiers died in a non-hostile manner. Sixty-one percent of the men killed were 21 years-old or younger and 25 percent of the men who fought in Vietnam had been drafted. Seventy-six percent of the men in Vietnam came from lower, middle, working class backgrounds. However, 79 percent of the men who served in Vietnam had a high school education or better, in contrast to the 63 percent who fought in Korea and the 45 percent who served in World War II. These are facts; they cannot represent the personal experience that a war time soldier would have known.

There are cultural and social occurrences within the history of the time that also affect the way these life narratives were written and received as well. As Marilyn Wesley notes “Although fighting a war is a matter of personal experience [...] winning that war, the alteration of a society’s predominant perceptions about its own purposes, is an effect of shared interpretation—the influence of narrative on minds” (2). The reader can see through journalistic reports the impact on society, both the American public and the soldier. According to the Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature, in 1961 newspaper headlines were optimistically hopeful in seeking out the “reds,” commenting on “Uncle Ho,” and relaying US aid to an encouraged but downtrodden Vietnam. By 1963, the tone had shifted and more emphasis was given to questioning American presence and military maneuvers. An emergence of soldiers’ accounts of war began in 1965. By 1968, headlines were accounting for not only military operations, but also atrocities, moral issues, and, perhaps most importantly, protests. The growing dissent of the American public was being seen through college teach-ins, sometimes violent protests, lest we forget the Kent State tragedy, marches on Washington, and violence toward returning soldiers. The anti-war sentiment had transnational effects not only on the American public and government officials, but unfortunately to varying to degrees on soldiers still fighting in Vietnam. In 1966, US News and World Report included a piece entitled “A Growing Plea from GI’s in Vietnam—‘The Least Those at Home Can Do is Support Us...’” which comments “[M]any of these GI’s are perplexed and saddened over what they hear about demonstrations in the U.S. On these pages are excerpts from letters written to families, to newspapers and to [this] magazine” (51). One private writes a

particularly interesting introduction with regard to the phrases Americans find themselves hearing again today:

At first when I saw this place I, myself, wondered if it was a good cause to fight for. But as time went along, I found out that we are fighting for one of the best reasons in the world, and that is freedom. (51)

Other soldiers took much more personal offense at the actions of those who demonstrated, saddened and angered at those who would or could not understand the role each soldier faced in times of battle:

While we are sitting in foxholes and fighting for our country and God, hundreds upon hundreds of people in our own country are protesting our being here [...] If only they could have the pleasure of sitting in the foxholes on the right and left of us, hour after hour and day after day, thinking how nice it would be for them to be back with their loved ones, or going to college, or even to have a bed to sleep in [...] For the college students and the others who march against us, this will not stop our drive [...] this only makes us fight harder. (51)

These men, and others like them, may not have fully understood what they were fighting for; indeed, they may have chosen to overlook the question of right or wrong in light of self preservation. Regardless, they were not unaffected by the efforts and actions of those who opposed the war. The backlash of the protests can also be seen in the more aggressive protestors who took violent action against the returning soldiers: “There were no victory parades, no brass bands, no cheering crowds” (Ayres). But the soldiers and

Vietnam cannot be separated from the Americans, protestor or not, back home. Both world views were effected, and this can be seen through literature that followed.

Albert E. Stone in his essay “Modern American Autobiography: Texts and Transactions” discusses the “literary thirties” within the context of decades of time which reveal “fundamental changes in cultural consciousness occur[ing] which suggest[ed], at least at the time, a real break with the past” (95). Stone warns against the dangers of periodizing history in terms of autobiography, but also questions whether or not “autobiography as nonfictional prose [is] susceptible to similar shifts and paradigms which bespeak the pressures of public as well as artistic events” (95-96). There are certain cultural and social activities that effect the literature and other forms of art and life that come from an entire country’s involvement in a situation regardless of their soldier or civilian status. Susanna Egan writes in her essay “‘Self’-Conscious History: American Autobiography after the Civil War” of Henry James and the effects of the Civil War on “American mind[s]” in that “the world became more complicated than it had seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult” (70). The same can be said for American society during and after the Vietnam era.

The victory of World War II, the “draw” in Korea, and the Cold War all culminated in the uncertainty of Vietnam. In citing Thomas Cooley’s suggestion about the implication of human nature through autobiography, Egan holds that Cooley’s suggestion is “plausible [...] because it grows out of contemporary perceptions of the significance of the Civil War, not just to the male world of the battlefield, government, or boardroom, but also to the heterogeneous identities —female, black, Indian, immigrant —that constitute and create postwar America” (71). As Frederic Jameson argues, “Any

era is characterized by the interplay of what is dominant —culturally, economically, politically —and what is deviant and original,” a position that holds true not just for the Civil War, the thirties, or the sixties, but for the Vietnam War and the author/veteran who emerged (qtd. in Stone 96). Leaving Americans affected culturally, socially, and politically, the Vietnam War was not something that would simply go away. The effects of the conflict would follow the United States for the next 30 years and is still being considered as can be seen through the proliferation of the veterans’ autobiographies.

In themselves, the numbers, statistics, war maneuvers and important dates are relative. Such figures can be cited for any number of the other wars, battles, and skirmishes the US has found itself involved in over the years. In regard to the US-Vietnamese conflict, such data is significant, of course, in terms of historical fact. However, what cannot be seen through this historical report is the effect the war had on the soldiers themselves, or the American people. Historical fact or statistics provide only a limited view of the scope of the war, since it ignores the individual experience. Reports can be read, but they fail to relate experience. It is questionable if any narrative of the war, whether a historical report or a personal story, can ever be understood by those who were not there, but by foregrounding personal experience, it can be attempted.

In November 1970 New York Times reporter B. Drummond Ayres Jr. wrote “The Vietnam Veteran: Silent, Perplexed, Unnoticed.” Ayres points out the relative and almost desired anonymity of the Vietnam veteran who “slipped quietly back into society — so quietly, in fact, that it is almost as if they had never gone away.” Echoing the sentiment of veteran/writers such as Tim O’Brien, Ayres points out that “the Vietnam veteran is taking care not to make a fuss. He is keeping a low profile, He is a silent veteran—

perhaps the nation's first—and he is on his way to becoming the nation's first forgotten veteran.” What we must do, however, instead of formulating our opinions from Hollywood fictions or learning our history from stilted and politically repressed textbooks is to make an effort to open our minds, put aside our insecurities about our worthiness to participate and experience, and read those authors who have, as Donald Ringnalda asserts, realized “they needed to throw the [official] book [of traditional truths about war] away, look below and within, and write a new script ” while revising our own ways of reading (Ringnalda, “Unlearning” 71).

Each life narrative is important and relevant to Vietnam War literature, not just for the author, but also for the reader. While each author's story is relevant to the existing literature, it is, more importantly, significant *because it is* that man's story. It is not the reader's place to deem the work fact or fiction, but to examine how the fact or fiction works in the memoir/novel. As each of the authors—O'Brien and Wolff —seem to emphasize, it isn't a matter of whether or not a situation actually occurred, but how that situation affected their lives, or the lives of their readers. As O'Brien writes in The Things They Carried, “[I]f at the end of a war story you feel uplifted you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie” (89).

Undoubtedly, autobiography by any definition and by any writer, and in terms of its analysis, is a tricky situation. It is indefinable and the terms that describe it are often interchangeable with one another. It is not a question of truth or historical fact. The author must struggle to make it worthy, accessible, warranted, yes, even sexy, but ultimately, the reader only has herself. The reader must be willing to read, interact, and

accept what is written, as Lejeune suggests not like a detective, but as an active participant. The Vietnam veteran is different from other war veterans. It is not that his war was worse, his days longer, battles bloodier, hunger more voracious, or trauma any more severe. What is different is his voice—how, and when, and to whom he spoke—and more importantly, if anyone deigned to listen.

SITREP AND OPERATION HOMECOMING

Both issues of this study—Vietnam and autobiography—are mired in political agendas. Without diminishing the importance of either, can such an agenda be transcended? Can an emphasis on right or wrong, privilege and subtext be replaced with, perhaps, an idealized discussion of the unquestionably fallible human condition? This study is not a search for moral or political rightness. Rather, it is a discussion of experience, particular to the Vietnam veteran who must, and deservedly so, find his voice for himself. After years of embarrassed silence, it is time for veteran and public alike to try and understand that the stereotype must be relinquished and stories told.

This must be done for understanding, for peace of mind, for current and future voices to have a model of revelation. Political and personal feelings aside, the American public find themselves once again facing the stories of returning soldiers. How can we seek to understand the present if we can't understand the past? If we leave the Vietnam veteran voiceless, how can the “new” veteran be expected to find his/her own voice? The intention of this study has been to explore two memoirs by respected author/veterans, not to determine truth or falsehood, political right or wrong, a moral or happy ending, but a valuable voice, a valid story that mixes genre, that plays with theory, but most importantly that speaks and leads by example.

Still, this study is not an effort to sanctify or damn either the protestors or the soldiers of the Vietnam War era. It is a call to arms. It is time for a “re-visioning” of the Vietnam veteran. In 1970 Ayres wrote that many veterans did not want to discuss the role they played while in country or the “rights or wrongs of the war” because they wanted instead to concentrate on “the straightforward, practical business of getting home

alive. To anyone still in that frame of mind, arguing about the war in the abstract seems absurd.” But now, 30 years later, with thousands of novels, poems, and memoirs written, and a new war in front of the American people, it is finally time to hear the veterans’ voices lest they become “the nation’s first forgotten veteran[s]” (Ayres).

Autobiographical theory has undergone vast changes since the 1960s. From Roy Pascal to Sidonie Smith, the evolution of autobiographical theory has opened the door for many kinds of people to share their voices. Much in the same way that autobiographical theory has lent itself to women for empowerment and place, it should do the same for Vietnam veterans who need an avenue to share their stories without censure.

American occupation of Vietnam ended in 1973. The conflict, the firefights were over, but Vietnam was not able to recover so quickly, nor was the soldier/veteran who had fought its battles. It was difficult in writing this thesis not to compare the vastly different narratives of Tim O’Brien’s If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home and Tobias Wolff’s In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War. There are a variety of ways the two author/veterans differ, including message, age when writing, duty in war, narrative structure, etc. But what is similar in both cases is purpose. Both men wrote so that others could hear their words and garner some understanding of what happened in Vietnam. It is not a question of morality or politics. It is not a question of historical accuracy. It is an opportunity to speak. To remember the men who shared their lives. To offer an explanation of why they are the men they have become.

O’Brien and Wolff are not every man; they do not offer a common experience or a universal “I,” but an individual one. What they offer is a chance to speak and encourage other veterans to do the same. Many men and women who have fought or

otherwise participated in foreign wars have written. Often, however, their stories are criticized in some capacity, questioning the validity of experience or worthiness as literature or just by belonging to the war genre at all. Why? As readers who actively read, we should agree to read these stories with the best intentions, not to judge, or to criticize. How can new veterans, or “old” for that matter, feel secure in offering their stories if there is no method by which they can be read?

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts started an initiative called Operation: Homecoming. This program is for soldiers and their families who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq to write their own stories including fiction, poetry, journals and memoir to be published in an anthology called Operation Homecoming: Writing the War Time Experience. Soldiers who want to participate can attend any number of workshops being conducted at military bases around the country and the globe. These workshops are being conducted by famous and talented authors, including Tobias Wolff, who share their talent and knowledge so that these voices will not be forgotten. The NEA is working with the Department of Defense to help these soldiers write. Although these workshops are limited to veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq, the website directs veterans of other wars to the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project, which also collects written and oral histories of war-time experience.

Veterans of all wars are finding their voices and finally, the American public is finding the will to listen.

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